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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the viability of journal writing as a distance education teaching technique designed to provide deeper understanding and mastery of curriculum content in graduate level education courses. In creating optimal learning experiences, four different types of journal writing can be utilized in various types of distance learning environments; however, the model demonstrated is used in two-way interactive video/audio conferencing. This instructional strategy serves as a basis for class discourse and student engagement in controversial debates and problem-solving activities. Enhancements dealing with content can be performed in both synchronous and asynchronous environments. The major sections of the paper cover the following topics: (1) meeting the challenge of the adult distance leaner; (2) a viable setting for implementing a new teaching technique; (3) a rationale for using journal writing in distance education courses; (4) journal writing as a distance education instructional strategy; (5) categories of journal writing techniques (i.e., student-to-instructor, student-to-student, small group interactive sharing, and student journal logs); and (6) assessment of student learning. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/MES)

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A Unique Strategy for Promoting Distance Learning Communities: Journal Writing as a Basis for Discourse

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Un Estrategia Unica para la Promocion del Comunidades Erudicion Distancias: Escritos del Diarios como un Basis para Discurso

(A Unique Strategy For Promoting Distance Learning Communities: Journal Writing as a Basis for Discourse)

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Ese papel examina la capacidad del escritos diarios como un ensenanza technica de educacion distancia con un diseno para proporcionar entendimiento profundo y superioridad de contenido estudios en los cursos educaciones graduados. En creando las experiencias estudias optimomas, cuatro tipos diferentes de escritos entendimientos sera empleado en tipos varios de los entornos distancias ensenanzas, sin embargo, el modelo demonstrado esta usado para las conferencias de dos direcciones con video y audiofrequencia interacciones. Esta estrategia de instruccion serva como un basis para discurso de los clases y empeno estudiante en debates controvertibles y los actividades para soluciones de las problemas. Los realces entiendo con contenido que sera ejecutado en entornos asi sincronico como non-sincronico.

In anticipation of planning a new or repeated course in a distance learning environment, distance educators usually reflect on past course sessions and attempt to determine how to utilize those strategies that resulted in optimum learning experiences while maintaining student interest. Even those instructors who have been in the field over the years ponder new ways to gain student interest and improve student learning of course content. A great deal of literature exists which discusses a variety of excellent approaches to distance learning in numerous subject disciplines. However, designing pedagogical approaches to student learning in a distance setting is more complex than in a traditional classroom since there are numerous "perceived obstacles which need to be overcome"(Reiding,1997, J-8). Although many researchers decry the adaptation of face-to-face classroom teaching techniques to distance learning environments (Knapper, 1988), there are some strategies which are transferable in enabling students to internalize information regardless of its original source such as text-based, graphic, electronic, or internet designed print. Likewise, other researchers tasked with the challenge of building interactive distance learning communities frequently integrate a variety of both traditional and "inventive" instructional strategies to support learning (Owen,

1989; Gunawardena & Boverie,1995; Johnson,1996). The uses of journal writing as an instructional strategy, in a variety of formats, represents a viable adaptation from the face-to-face classroom to the distance learning environment.

This article examines the viability of journal writing as a distance education teaching technique designed to provide for deeper understanding and mastery of curriculum content in graduate education courses. As a successful practice in distance education, the most touted advantage of this instructional strategy is that it enhances the communication processes between student and instructor, and between and among student class members. Different approaches to journal writing, as described later in this paper, can be utilized to engage students in an in-depth study of content; employment of this technique enables students to 'organize and structure content', 'relate and distinguish evidence and argument', and 'relate concepts to everyday experience' (Brundage et al.,1993). Journal writing provides an avenue for students to reflect on content, indulge in inquiry, and share reactions and responses in numerous ways with the instructor, individual classmates, and/or small groups within the assigned class. This strategy brings reality to an otherwise research-based world. Although the description of this instructional strategy is designed for adult learners in graduate level education classes, readers may envision adaptations to their own subject discipline.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF THE ADULT DISTANCE LEARNER

One of the basic premises of distance education is its challenge to provide a viable educational experience for adult learners. There is also the additional task of attracting and maintaining adult students by offering course work using pedagogical strategies that will meet their learning needs and learning styles thus enabling them to engage in learning experiences in such a manner that continued involvement in occupational and family commitments are not hindered. Some of these challenges constitute maintaining student interest, ensuring mastery of course content, gaining student satisfaction, overcoming the isolation inherent in distance learning, and pursuing engagement in an inquiry-based, student centered learning process. In

planning pedagogical approaches to course work, instructors will benefit from understanding the characteristics of most adult learners.

A great deal of research has been conducted to delineate 'profiles' of successful, satisfied distance learners however not much attention has been granted the important variable of 'individual learner characteristics' (Threlkeld & Brzoska,1994). Moller (1991), in his Assure model, advocates that instructors conduct a learner analysis prior to the development of a distance education course. This analysis would provide information regarding learner characteristics so that the course design could reflect preferred student learning styles in the selection of instructional strategies for pedagogical implementation. Moller claims that planning to meet student needs based on identified learner characteristics may also assist in student satisfaction and achievement. Another survey which may be used is the 'Learning Styles Inventory' by Hansen, Silver and Strong which is theoretically based on the' Myers-Briggs Personality Test' (Perrin,1997). This inventory enables instructors to determine the number of class members whose learning styles are identified within the four categories of directive, inquiry, creative, and/or interactive. Understanding the class make-up facilitates the task of targeting the instructional strategies towards some styles more than others while including, to some extent, all four styles. Providing instruction based on acknowledgement of student learning needs encourages student motivation and fosters student academic growth. These areas represent important factors to be considered in the development of distance education curricula andpedagogy.

Since graduate school degrees represent credentials for promotion in the educational field, distance learners in this discipline are more likely to engage in serious discourse and inquiry to gain the necessary knowledge base which will assist in upward position mobility and socioeconomic class (Heinze,1983). Research reveals that most graduate school distance learners usually consist of adults who are "mature, independent, and self-reliant"...[who] lead complex lives and have substantial commitments to jobs and/or families...are unable to commute to the physical campus ...are eager to learn and...assume responsibility for their own

learning" (Perrin, 1997, p.15). Most adult learners, of average age 28, pay for their own education and are therefore more self-disciplined, self-directed, and likely to be successful in this milieu (Dille & Mezack, 1991).

Cropley & Kahl (1983), in their study of distance learner characteristics, determine that many adult students possess psychological traits i.e., being "self-starters, self pacers, self-evaluators, goal-setters, and capable of self-directed learning" (p. 36). Their observations validate other findings regarding common distance learner traits such as a preference for learning modes which are self-directed, and a tendency toward problem-based learning as opposed to curriculum-oriented pedagogy (Humphrey, 1974). These profiles offer a portrait of the types of learners for whom instructors must design instructional strategies to foster optimal learning conditions.

The objective of creating and sustaining an optimal distance learning environment constitutes a demanding planning and teaching task. Much of instructor planning has to occur well in advance of scheduled on-line sessions especially for those college/university sites which necessitate equipment operator assistance. Preparation for course initiation involves decisions regarding establishment of web-sites with the essential content, home-page design documents, specific references for Internet searches, creation of graphics, etc., which are all time-consuming tasks. Planning the anticipated schedule of events during a class session, necessitates envisioning time allotments for curriculum coverage and possible equipment problem delays. For newcomers initiating plans, there is an abundance of planning suggestion guides offered on the Internet at various sites; for instance, the San Diego University web page by Jodi Reed and Merry Woodruff (1995) provides a lesson plan matrix and a " telelearning checklist" to assist distance educators in keeping track of completing essential details in preparation for initial teaching sessions. The Instructional Development Process at the University of Idaho Engineering Outreach website offers a good step by step and reflective process (1995).

In summarizing this perspective of planning to meet adult learner needs in anticipation of

the myriad tasks to be accomplished prior to course implementation, examining and selecting the best alternatives to create optimal learning experiences become the predominant concern in working within the distance education milieu. Not only is there the concern for exploring the opportunities available through the employment of technology, but there is the need to address learning on a more personal level and certainly in consideration of both the cognitive and affective domains essential to successful adult learning. One basic strategy in attempting to serve adult learners effectively in the distance learning environment is to institute techniques which engage students in such a manner that learning is viewed as a beneficial, enjoyable, and worthwhile experience. Therefore, introducing journal writing activities and other types of non-traditional pedagogical approaches to graduate distance learning experiences represent instituting sound educational practices in overcoming the challenges of the distance learning environment.

A VIABLE SETTING FOR IMPLEMENTING A NEW TEACHING TECHNIQUE

The following description portrays a distance learning environment in which journal writing strategies are being utilized on one graduate college campus. As part of a large university, satellite campuses often offer distance courses in graduate education utilizing two-way interactive video/audio-conferencing via Picture-tel. The use of this technology encourages spontaneous response and supports collegiality and collaboration among students and the instructor. The latest features of compressed digital video-conferencing equipment permits full functionality with easy application sharing; students from different sites can work together on reports, projects, and presentations in real time. Full class sessions primarily utilize synchronous interaction formats described as "real time, live, and conversation-like...instructional session[s]"(Threlkeld & Brzoska,1994, p. 46). Asynchronous sessions, consisting of email communications, Internet assignments, home page access, and group chat rooms, provide for individual coverage of class assignments and group sharing of reactions and responses to subject content fostered by journal writing strategies. Small campuses, operating

within a larger university, find utilizing two-way interactive video for class sessions cost effective since it is balanced by the large number of students being served (Ludlow, B., 1994). However, campus sites which lack such support may expect to encounter an expensive venture.

Class sessions for distance education courses at this graduate school are scheduled two to three hours in length twice a week during a seven week semester. Computer staff assist in initiating the sessions at both sites after which the instructor (home site) and selected students control the technology at the distant site (s). Once or twice during the semester, the instructor visits the distance site to communicate in person with class members. However, the most important aspect of this setting involves the dissemination of class assignments and curriculum coverage. This is an environment which fosters the assignment of projects rather than final examinations to demonstrate student knowledge of both content and application of subject matter.

Textbooks, white board, electronic mail, and computer technology are all used as teaching tools in this distance environment. However, of significance for the teaching and learning processes is the manner in which these tools are employed in developing and maintaining open lines of communication between students and fostering student/instructor dialogues.

A RATIONALE FOR USING JOURNAL WRITING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES

There appears to be numerous reasons why journal writing may be successfully instituted in distance learning courses. Exchange of ideas through journal commentary used as basis for class discourse alleviates the psycho-social distance prevalent in working in an asynchronous mode (Rezabek, 1997). Synchronous usage facilitates class member cohesiveness through active two-way video-conferencing discourse thus decreasing temporal and spatial distance. Student engagement in controversial issues and problem-solving activities based on course content serves as a motivational and humanistic factor in class discussions and enhances student interest. All of these factors contribute to establishing a community of distance learners as opposed to a class group of isolated individuals.

Therefore, maintaining good communication processes between distance learning students and the instructor is one of the foremost essential tasks in designing distance education courses. In a study of a mid-western regional state university, Von Holzen(1995), examined the capacity of electronic mail to support the use of student journals to achieve change in student computer-related attitudes and knowledge. As a result of his research, he determined that the use of an asynchronous mode for this teaching technique helped enhance communication between students and the instructor. In addition, students who used this medium cited their preference for electronic mail communications versus hand-written journals.

Implementing any of the basic categories of journal writing reflections utilizing an asynchronous mode by sharing journal commentary establishes a basis for student discourse in a synchronous format. Discourse based on prior exchange of perspectives on issues shared asynchronously provides for exciting and lively interactive video-conference class sessions. Even more characteristically motivational is the request that students, after reading course literature, assume positional stances based on a particular side of an issue and produce arguments from a prescribed point of view. Problem-based learning is another technique that maintains student interest and task engagement during two-way video-conference sessions. This strategy, therefore, lends itself well to using both modes in devising various combinations of student interactivity throughout a distance learning course. It also serves as the foundation for establishing a community of learners as students share relevant accounts based on issues which evolve from discussion of course content.

In addition to these other features, journal writing, as an instructional strategy, encourages critical thinking, fosters intellectualism, is student centered, and assists in student cognition. Requesting students to analyze content and share their analysis with other class members enables students to develop good critical thinking skills and develop a broader knowledge base (Johnson, 1995). To enhance critical thinking, students need to establish relationships between the theoretical, abstract concepts and concrete everyday ideas (Garside, 1994). Therefore engaging students in active versus passive learning techniques enables

instructors to assist in the construction of knowledge rather than the transmission of information.

In terms of intellectual development, as students examine their reactions to course literature in view of the perspectives of others they begin to integrate and synthesize information which informs their initial appraisal of issues. These processes serve to enhance critical thinking which in turn, generate subsequent questions for exploration through class discourse; thus, journal commentary becomes the 'spring-board' for problem-posing and problem-solving. The use of problems assist students in learning explicit thinking skills such as "analyzing a problem conceptually, formulating and evaluating various ways of seeking solutions" and examining solutions for their effectiveness (Lowman, 1995, p. 236). Combining these learning processes appears to contribute to a higher degree of student cognition since it requires internalizing information for application. In addition, providing an environment for students to analyze, reflect, and synthesize course content in view of their own practical knowledge base permits a shift from teacher directed to student focused learning. Student selection of issues, problems, and concerns, become the focus of both journal commentary and partner/class discourse (Johnson, 1995). This form of student centered learning offers opportunities for distance learners to develop skills in both the cognitive and affective domains.

JOURNAL WRITING AS A DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

Prior to initiating any instructional strategy is the identification of what and how instructors desire distance learners to acquire certain types of knowledge. Since the research cited portrays these learners primarily as characteristically autonomous in nature, and revealing a preference for problem-solving activities, determining a pedagogical approach which supports these traits assists in guiding students towards attaining the knowledge desired. Therefore, engaging in journal writing as a teaching/learning technique is acknowledged as a useful strategy to meet distance learner needs.

Based on the information desired to be internalized, instructors determine the content of the journal entries which may consist of any combination which follows: (1) a critique or analysis of an author's perspective on an issue as offered in text, graphic, Internet site, etc., (2) a description of the relevance of the issue to one's own real life practical, or observed experience, or an hypothetical experience, (3) an offered solution to the problem posed by authors in the text, and/or (4) a posing of questions based on analysis of the authors' works. The most important aspect of engagement in journal writing is its establishment of a premise for class discourse, whether on a partner, small group, or class basis.

The use of journals as a means of reflecting on and synthesizing main concepts from course literature is acknowledged as a valid approach to student cognition (Seshachari, 1994). Journal sharing of perspectives through critiques, relating practical experiences to course content, and developing inquiry for problem-solving based on analysis enhances connecting prior knowledge to new knowledge, fosters intellectual growth through critical thinking, and encourages a student centered focus for engagement in class discourse.

CATEGORIES OF JOURNAL WRITING TECHNIQUES

Employment of journal writing is accomplished through numerous dialogue modes such as student-to-instructor, student-to-student (partner journals), small group interactive sharing, and student journal logs. Selection of the dialogue mode depends on the desired outcome and is represented in the following categories.

In the first category of student-to-instructor, journal sharing through email enhances communication between student and instructor in content coverage with consistent and immediate feedback; although representative of purist thinking in the implementation of journal writing to accomplish academic goals, this constitutes a time-consuming task for the instructor especially if the technique is representative of only one type of distance class interaction.

A preferred category involves student-to-student partner journals. In this second

category, class members select partners based on a knowledge of member interests as determined by initial class discourse during video-conference class sessions. Journal partners are requested to reflect on assigned portions of the textual course content and to share their perspectives via electronic mail; their reflections are further shared with class members during video-conference class sessions and are used as a basis for class discourse of issues based on authors' perspectives. Shared perspectives are ultimately submitted to the instructor for review and response near the end of the semester; journal response page lengths are established to maintain equal and focused reflections. However, the establishment of an on-line forum "places students in control of what to write, when...and how to respond"(Owen, 1983, p. 2). This manner of learning represents a valid approach to internalizing information through examination of issues using analysis, reflection, shared perspectives, argumentation, question posing, solution offering, etc. (Garside, 1994).

Small group interactive journal sharing, a third category, can be accomplished by setting specific times for groups of students to engage in sharing their perspectives during a "journal chat room session". This accommodation sets the stage for exchange of views and argumentative positions as students may be assigned to assume specific stances (or positions) of an issue and to argue from that perspective. Outcomes of the arguments can later be shared during regular class video-conference sessions. These smaller sessions set the stage for whole group discourse designed to support critical and creative thinking, retention of content matter and construction of new knowledge. Viewed as a computer-mediated forum, this format provides a "meaningful, language-based context for ideas to be offered up in written form"(Owen, 1983, p. 2).

The last category of student journal logs represents the least interactive strategy. However, it may be useful if there are numerous other instructional strategies being employed which utilize most of the video-conference class session. Students would be requested to engage in implementing any of the aforementioned journal writing formats (or categories) thus recording their own perspectives within a given framework in a weekly log to be submitted to the instructor at the semester's end. Journal logs may still be used as a basis for class

discussion with limited sharing during actual class sessions since not all students will be able to discuss their perspectives. However, another aspect of all journal writing not previously presented is the request that students further reflect after class discourse based on sharing viewpoints or arguing positions with class members by adding a few sentences describing their "after thoughts". These later reflections may demonstrate a strengthening of the students' initial views or a change in viewpoints based on acknowledgement of the strengths of arguments or experiences introduced by class discourse. All of these categories of journal writing provide opportunities for student exchange of reactions to literature thereby expanding their learning experiences and enhancing their knowledge basis. It is representative of true cognition versus superficial types of learning since it engages the distance learner in critical thinking activities, problem-based learning and, dependent on the issues to be discussed, stimulates learner motivation in actual learning of course content (Bolling, 1994).

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

The remaining question involves how an instructor can determine growth and development in student knowledge of the assigned course content using journal writing as the main, or at least, as one type of instructional strategy. In the process described in terms of implementation of journal writing, a number of rules and procedures must be observed by students for appropriate engagement in this method of instruction. Primarily, students must follow the prescribed assignment schedules, observe length and format of journal entry, complete assignments on time, engage in interaction with partner or small group class members in a timely manner, use the discussed journal commentary as a basis for class discourse during interactive video-conference classes, and submit completed journals to the instructor for review, response, and grading on request.

Most of these procedures can be observed by the instructor through periodic contact with class members through email or engagement in chat room groups as an "infrequent" visitor. In addition, questions posed by the instructor during distance class sessions or analysis and

critiques offered by class members will serve to provide some informal assessment of how well students are understanding and applying the assigned content matter. However, in using any of the journal writing formats (partner, etc.), the instructor will request printed or emailed copies of student journal commentary for reading and responses. Although this procedure is recommended as a summary step in student assessment, periodic assessment checking of journal entries is important both to the instructor and the student (Peruniak,1983). Instructor response provides the instructor with an opportunity to offer some written feedback and enables students to evaluate how the instructor perceives their understanding of the subject content. And vice versa, reading and responding to student journals enables the instructor to gain a sense of the extent to which the student has internalized the information, is (or was) capable of its application in discourse, and has demonstrated some growth and development from the initial to the final journal entries. This procedure assists in assessing how well students are achieving graduate education curricular course goals since journals reveal student thinking and beliefs based on their reaction to subject content combined with their own personal experiences.

The final question involves how journal commentary is graded. Instructors can develop their own rubrics which are shared with students at the outset of the course; this procedure may work with some course material, but not all. Instructors can construct categories which analyze student commentary, attitudinal change, and growth in the manner in which the student selects and discusses issues. Since opinion and reflection play a large role in written journal commentary, the focus, unfortunately mainly subjective in character, is comprised of criteria which determines how much content is demonstrated as grasped by the student, how much growth in understanding content is exhibited, and the extent to which the student engaged in critical thinking, inquiry, and connecting new with prior knowledge. As observed in numerous traditional as well as distance learning classes, it appears that student interest tends to be quite high during journal writing and sharing activities, therefore most student work is probably highly correlated to this criteria.

The description of the implementation of this distance learning teaching technique should

provide both instructors and students with a viable method of internalized learning of course content. Since the focus of most education literature deals with the findings of researchers in the field and the accounts of successful practices, most course work can easily utilize some format of journal writing successfully within a two-way video-conference environment. Parts of this instructional strategy can also be used with audio-conferencing in combination with computer-mediated learning, however it may not provide all the available benefits. As more literature abounds in most subject disciplines, especially in the field of education, journal writing may become an optimal technique for graduate school students engaging in two-way interactive, video-conference distance education course work.

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ABSTRACT

A Unique Strategy For Promoting Distance Learning Communities: Journal Writing as a Basis for Discourse

This paper examines the viability of journal writing as a distance education teaching technique designed to provide deeper understanding and mastery of curriculum content in graduate level education courses. In creating optimal learning experiences, four different types of journal writing can be utilized in various types of distance learning environments, however the model demonstrated is used in two way interactive video/audio conferencing. This instructional strategy serves as a basis for class discourse and student engagement in controversial debates and problem-solving activities. Enhancements dealing with content can be performed in both synchronous and asynchronous environments.

KEY WORDS

distance education instructional strategy

journal writing as a basis for discourse

creating optimal distance learning experiences

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

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